

# *Sketch*

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## Winter Grass

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# Winter Grass

by Dan McKeever

*Anthropology, Jr.*

**B**LACK COYOTE huddled in the draw, his eyes intent upon the rabbit. His hands, blue from cold, twitched uncontrollably on the frigid barrel of his rifle.

It was late in the day, and an icy wind blew in gale strength across the plain. The short prairie grass was withered and brown, and only a few small drifts of powder-dry snow had gathered in the lee of the clumps of grass.

The Minneconjou Dakota's clothing was ragged, and his feet were only slightly less frozen than his hands. The cut-up blanket in which his feet were wrapped was thread-bare.

The rabbit was suspicious, but, like all of its kind—short-sighted and short-memoried. The hunter's footsteps had caused it to run, but twenty feet away from its original hiding place, the rabbit sat up on its haunches to look around.

Black Coyote winced at the pain in his hands as he tried to keep the rifle's sights upon the rabbit. The sights wavered, and tears ran from his eyes to freeze upon his stiff cheeks. A wisp of hair blew into his eyes, and the Indian groaned in pain as he squeezed the trigger.

The rabbit's body jerked and then flipped across the ground as the gun shot echoed for miles across the wastes. Black Coyote saw the rabbit's blood on the winter grass, but he did not hear the shot. He was deaf.

The horse's legs jerked spasmodically as the swaybacked animal lurched and jolted over clods and uneven ground. Black Coyote had tied rifle and rabbit to his saddle horn,

and he rode hunched over and wrapped in a long saddle blanket.

With a final stagger, the pony plodded onto the smoother ground of a trail, and the deaf Dakota pulled sharply on the reins to stop the animal. His people had come this way, but over the tracks of their ponies and travois were the tracks of shod horses—soldier horses.

Pulling the blanket from over his head, Black Coyote studied the far horizon and then kicked the pony's sides. As the bony animal broke into a ragged lope, he untied the Winchester from the saddle horn and held it ready in his arms.

At twilight, he saw the first of the soldier sentries and then the fires in his people's tipis, and he felt relieved at seeing his people unharmed. Dismounting, he carefully hid the rifle under his blanket and led his pony across the ice covered stream called Wounded Knee.

Two soldiers saw him and raised their carbines menacingly, but he continued to walk slowly toward them. They lowered their guns and, seeing their lips move, Black Coyote made vague motions at his ears and shook his head. He grinned and held up the rabbit and they let him pass.

As the Dakota walked into the village, he studied the large soldier camp and the line of sentries around his own village.

His brother One Legging and his small nephew Little Crane met him at the edge of the village, and the little boy led off his pony. Carrying the rabbit, Black Coyote walked with his brother to their tipi and gave the frozen animal to his brother's wife. Squatting in front of the fire and massaging his hands and feet, the deaf man looked up at his brother expectantly.

He had not always been deaf. He had lost his hearing two years previously in a freak accident while blasting stumps with black powder. The unplanned explosion had ruptured his ears and left scars on his neck. Since that time, he had learned to understand other people by watching their lips and also by sign language.

Speaking slowly so that his deaf brother could see his lips and also by using signs, One Legging made his brother to understand that the soldiers had overtaken the Minne-

conjou band a little while after he had left the column to hunt.

"Tomorrow," One Legging signed, "the Blue Coats take us back to the reservation."

"They harmed no one?" his brother signed back.

"No. The soldier chief gave Big Foot one of his tents to sleep in."

"Is he better now?"

"No, the coughing sickness is still within him. The Medicine Man, Yellow Bird, can do nothing to stop the blood that comes from his mouth."

Little Crane returned with Black Coyote's saddle and then hungrily watched as his mother spitted the rabbit on long sticks over the fire.

Black Coyote also watched hungrily a moment and then busied himself with cleaning his rifle. He unloaded it and wiped and inspected each cartridge before returning it to the rifle's magazine. He took great pride in the Winchester for it was the best anyone in the band owned. Besides, he had worked three months in a white trader's store to buy it.

Wrapping the gleaming weapon in a blanket, The deaf Dakota hid it carefully under his saddle. He did not want the soldiers to find it and take it from him.

The wind crept under the tipi cover and the hungry family ate the rabbit quickly before it could get cold. One Legging banked the fire, and they wrapped themselves in their blankets and tried to sleep.

Black Coyote slid his hand under his saddle and clutched the Winchester as he tightly closed his eyes.

Big Foot coughed and blood ran down his chin. Yellow Bird had told him that the whites had caused him to be sick, but the soldier doctor had told him that he had pneumonia and if he kept warm and rested, he would soon be well.

The soldier chief's iron stove kept the tent warm, but Big Foot was swept with chills and as he coughed again it ached in his bowels.

Staring at the dull, red glow of the stove, the Minn-conjou chief heard the white soldiers calling to each other as they kept watch on the camp.

"We should not have left the reservation," he thought.

"These soldiers have not harmed us. But I was afraid they would kill us as they killed Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull and others."

He became aware of Yellow Bird standing over him, and his eyes wandered over the designs on the shaman's Ghost Shirt. Ghost Shirts that would repel white soldier's bullets, the old man insisted.

Big Foot dozed but did not sleep. He saw his father in a dream and the man's face was painted black. Again he coughed and the pain made him sit up.

The Paiute Wovoka had said that he had spoken to God and God had told him that if all Indians danced the Ghost Dance, then he would return to earth. And when he came back, all the whites would be destroyed and the dead would rise and the good life would return.

Big Foot was tired and he did not believe he would live to see it. He coughed again and tasted blood in the mouth.

When dawn came, Black Coyote had not slept and his eyes were puffy as he watched his brother pull on his Ghost Shirt and hide a knife under it.

"The white soldier chief wants to talk to all the warriors," One Legging signed to him and Black Coyote followed him from the lodge. Before he left, he carefully hid the rifle under the blanket he had wrapped around him.

Outside, the air was colder and from the quick driven clouds and the smell of the air, the Deaf Dakota knew that a blizzard was fast approaching.

The warriors gathered by the white chief a little way from the Indian camp. Black Coyote saw Big Foot sitting on a blanket. Blood and phlegm covered the sick man's chin and clothes. Yellow Bird stood near him and he could see that the shaman was speaking to the warriors, but he could not see his lips to tell what the old man was saying.

As the soldier chief spoke to the warriors, Black Coyote paid no attention but merely sat quietly near Big Foot and carressed the polished stock of his rifle. A few warriors left the council circle and returned with several broken guns. The soldier chief waved his arms, and Black Coyote saw a long line of soldiers enter the camp and begin to search tipis.

For the first time, he became aware of the wagon guns on the hill overlooking the Dakota camp and the many soldiers who stood in lines surrounding the camp.

The soldiers were throwing robes and clothing out of the lodges, and the Minneconjou warriors were growing uneasy as they saw their women trying to resist. Yellow Bird began to chant and dance and, although he could not see the shaman's words, he could see that they were having an effect on the restless warriors.

A soldier stumbled against him and the rifle barrel poked out from under the blanket. The soldier grabbed it and the deaf Dakota was dragged to his feet with his hands desperately clenched to the gun.

"This is my gun. I bought it," he shouted. "I need it to hunt—to live."

He tried to jerk away from the soldier, but the blue coat buffeted him roughly. As he stumbled about, Black Coyote saw that One Legging was getting up to help him.

The deaf man caught Big Foot's gaze and the ill man said to him with lips and eyes, "Please. There are many soldiers. I want my people to live." Black Coyote knew his chief was right.

"I will put it down," he shouted at the soldier, but the man did not understand him. Black Coyote tried to put the gun down, but now the soldier chief was grabbing for it and the two soldiers twisted the Dakota around in circles. Black Coyote felt the jar in his hands as the rifle went off.

He watched in horror as the soldier chief shot Big Foot, and he saw the flashes of the soldier's guns and felt deep fear at the sudden pain in his chest. As he stumbled, the Dakota saw the wagon guns firing and the shells from them exploding in the village killing women and children.

A slug struck the back of his head and as he fell, for the first and last time in two years, he heard the wind blowing free.

One Legging lay beside his brother and moaned as his sharpnel-torn stomach oozed out between his hands. Then he felt the first flakes of the coming blizzard on his face, and he slept. The wind blew the torn flap of his Ghost Shirt across his stomach and his congealing blood froze it to his skin. The blood from his limp hands froze black on the winter grass.